

American Political Thought

George Mason University, Government 420

Professor R. Boyd

Spring 2025

Mondays 4:30-7PM lecture/ discussion

Office Hours: Mondays before class and by appt

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Course Description:

American political thought represents a study in paradoxes. Ostensibly a secular nation based on the strict separation of church and state, America's political culture was at the time of the Founding, and remains even today, deeply suffused by religious faith and imagery. How do Americans balance a fervent commitment to individual liberty with a passion for equality; scientific progress with the preservation of tradition; or economic innovation and the pursuit of self-interest with a genius for philanthropic charity? Why do Americans cherish privacy, individuality, or civil disobedience on the one hand, even as they extol civic engagement, patriotism, and voluntary association, on the other? How can historical injustices of slavery and racial exclusion be reconciled with America's fundamental commitments to liberalism?

This course explores the origins of these and other enduring tensions in the American political tradition. Students will read and discuss primary texts from several different epochs including Puritan New England, the American Revolution, the Founding Era, nineteenth-century critiques of democratic culture, controversies over slavery and race in the years leading up to the Civil War, and the legacy of these debates for American politics today.

Required Texts, available for purchase in inexpensive paperback editions at the George Mason Bookstore or by Amazon, etc.

Madison, Hamilton and Jay, *The Federalist* (Penguin)

Abraham Lincoln, *Selected Speeches and Writings* (Library of America)

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, translated by George Lawrence. (Harper Perennial Modern Classics) [*strongly preferred edition/ translation*]

Additional Short Documents and Excerpts, uploaded and accessible via Blackboard/Canvas

Section 1. Course Introduction and the Puritan Roots of the American Tradition (1/23 [ZOOM], 1/27 [In-Person, as per regular schedule], 1/29 [Asynchronous lecture make-up class])

"Mayflower Compact" (1620)

#John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630)

#John Winthrop, "The Little Speech on Liberty" (1639)

#Roger Williams, "The Bloody Tenent of Persecution" (1644)

#Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741)

#Samson Occom, "Sermon at the Execution of Moses Paul" (1758)

#Benjamin Franklin, "The Art of Virtue" (1784)

[Asynchronous PowerPoint lecture on Puritans/Franklin uploaded for 1/29]

Section 2. Rhetoric and Reason in the American Revolution (2/3, 2/10, 2/17)

#Samuel Adams, "The Rights of the Colonists" (1772)

#Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776)

#Jefferson, "Declaration of Independence" (1776)

#Thomas Hutchinson, "Strictures upon the Declaration of Independence" (1776)

Section 3. Crafting the American Constitution (2/24, 3/3, 3/17)

The Federalist, numbers 1, 2, 6, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 27, 28, 31, 35, 37, 47, 48, 49, 51, 55, 58, 70, 71, 72, 78, 84.

"Letter from Samuel Adams to Richard Henry Lee," December 3, 1787

"Letters from a Federal Farmer" (Melancton Smith?)

[In-Class Midterm Exam 3/17]

Section 4. Democracy in America? (3/24, 3/31, 4/7) [Reaction paper on Tocqueville, due 4/10]

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, "Author's Introduction," Volume I, Pt. 1. Chs. 2-5; Pt. 2, Chs. 2, 4, 6-9;

Volume II, Pt. 1, Chs. 5-14; Pt. 2, Chs. 1-15; Pt. 3, Chs. 1-2, 8, 12, 14, 18-19.

Section 5. Slavery and the Crisis of the Union (4/14, 4/21 and 4/28) [Reaction paper on Douglass, due 5/1]

Abraham Lincoln, "Young Men's Lyceum," pp. 13-21.

Frederick Douglass, "Is it Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnapper?"

Lincoln, "Fragments on Government and Slavery," p. 91; "Speech on the Dred Scott Decision," pp. 117-128; "House Divided Speech," pp. 131-139; "Lecture on Discoveries," pp. 200-208;

"Address at Cooper Institute," pp. 240-251; "Address at Gettysburg," p. 405; "Second Inaugural," pp. 449-450.

Douglass, "What the Black Man Wants"

Section 6. Liberalism, Conservatism, and Civil Rights in American Politics (5/5)

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "The Four Freedoms" (1941)

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1963)

Barry Goldwater, "The Conscience of a Conservative" (1960)

Milton Friedman, "Social Responsibility of Business" (1970)

Barack Obama, "Speech on Race" (2008)

[Take-Home Final Exam DUE 5/10 To Be Submitted Through Blackboard]

Course Requirements:

There are three formal course requirements for American Political Thought:

- 1) Blue book, in-class Midterm exam—25%.
- 2) 2 short reaction papers—10%
- 3) Prepared attendance and class participation—25%
- 4) Take-Home Final exam—40%.

Students should note that class format is what I describe as “interactive lecture.” Without regular attendance and active engagement in the lectures and accompanying discussion, it will be very difficult for students to do well in this course. Students should come to class having done the readings for each session and prepared to answer questions about the material if called on. Attendance and Participation is also a graded component of the course, and you may take the following guidelines as an approximation of how A&P will be assessed:

- Absent in three or more sessions without medical documentation: 0-15/25 points
- Present in most sessions but distracted/ no significant contributions: 20-21 points
- Regularly present; occasional/ unproductive contributor: 22 points
- Regular, active, productive participant: 23-24 points
- Class leader: 25 points

Grading Scale:

A=100-93
A-=92.99-90
B+=89.99-87
B=86.99-83
B-=82.99-80
C+=79.99-77
C=76.99-73
C-=72.99-70

Mathematical grade cut-off's are absolute, and I don't “round up” final grades except under exceptional circumstances.

Statement on Academic Integrity and Use of Artificial Intelligence:

Students should familiarize themselves with the policies and expectations of George Mason University's Academic Standards Code (<https://academicstandards.gmu.edu/academic-standards-code/>), which apply to all courses taught under the auspices of GMU, “including non-degree seeking students.”

In brief, all academic work is expected to represent the student's own ideas, writing, and research unless otherwise acknowledged using one of the standard forms of academic citation. Alleged violations will be referred immediately to the Academic Standards Office for adjudication and, if determined to be academic misconduct, may result in a failing grade for the class.

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence/ ChatGPT has created new challenges and gray areas, but as a general rule, if these or other tools are used in lieu of the student's own independent writing, research, or

analysis they undermine the learning goals of the course. This is true regardless of whether a student's use of these technologies is acknowledged or deceptive. Your grade in this course is a function of your engagement with arguments and ideas of the required readings, and your ability to use evidence from this material to advance analytical or interpretive arguments. For several reasons it is unlikely that material generated using AI tools will prove a sufficient substitute for your own original analysis and a careful study of the readings. Conversely, reliance on these or other tools has the potential to yield phantom citations, erroneous interpretations, and inadvertent violations of the Honor Code.